

Transcript of Interview with Anne Sherman by Neta Kafka
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Abstract

In this interview, Kolot Chayeinu Board President Anne Sherman discusses how she became a member of Kolot with her family at the time of her son Benjamin's bar mitzvah, and how Anne subsequently rose to Board Member and now President. Anne elaborated on how her involvement at Kolot has been within the "context of major change," adaptation, and growth; she joined the Board around the time that founding Rabbi Ellen Lippmann announced her retirement, and just a few years later the COVID-19 pandemic hit. She described the main challenges and projects she has worked on as Board Member and President, including the development of full-time staff, leadership transitions, exponential community growth, institutionalizing new organization standards and Board committees, advancing on a path towards anti-racism, and the financial logistics of running a religious congregation. Anne also spoke of her personal spiritual journey, beliefs, and conversion to Judaism, and how she developed a sense of duty and obligation to serve others, not only in her role at Kolot but as a professional non-profit consultant and strategic planner.

Neta Kafka [00:00:05]: Okay. So, my name is Neta Kafka, I am part of the Kolot Chayeinu-Middlebury College Oral History Project Collaboration. Um, I'm here with Anne Sherman, who's president of the Kolot Chayeinu Board, and we are in Prospect Park¹...

Anne Sherman: Yes we are.

Neta Kafka: ...in Brooklyn, New York. Um, and Anne I guess I would just my first question would be, if you can start by telling me about how you got to where you are now with Kolot and sort of your journey of and relationship with Kolot to this point.

Anne Sherman [00:00:46]: Sure. So let's see. We joined, my husband, Russell and I joined... I don't even know how many years ago, but our son was about in the third grade, so...I don't know, maybe 2010, something like that. 2011. And yeah, so he could start his education to become a bar mitzvah, which was still a few years off. And so that was how we joined. And I wasn't active really particularly at all. And then... But... around that time, or soon after, our founding Rabbi, Ellen Lippmann, announced her retire...or she gave the congregation three years warning... notice, and she, um, the community started doing a series of, um, like sort of planning discussions as part of this, to, I think, maybe they were not connected but to understand what the congregation was thinking about the community and the direction it should go in. And my work has for a long time been doing strategic planning with nonprofits and foundations. And I went to at least one or two of these community meetings, and Ellen was there. I'm. And. It's really still a bit of a mystery. But anyway, I think they were looking for new board members. The board needed at least one new

¹ This interview was recorded outdoors on a balmy October day in Prospect Park in Brooklyn NY, nearby The Church of Gethsemane in the Park Slope neighborhood, where Kolot holds its Saturday services. Landscape architects Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux – who also planned Manhattan's Central Park, among many other famous public spaces – designed the Prospect Park in the 1860s. Initial construction ended in 1873, although additions and changes continued into the 1890s, and renovations through the 1980s. Today, the park covers 526 acres and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Throughout the interview, ambient noise from adults, children, animals, and natural elements in the park can be heard.

member.² And I think Ellen suggested that they considered recruiting, seeing if I'd be interested, which I was. I remember thinking I was going through like a very tough period professionally³ and one I was just really flattered to be asked, to be noticed by the rabbi. And then, too, for this to turn into an invitation. And it was a just very good, very helpful, like, validation of what I had to offer because as I said, I was going through a tough time professionally and I really wasn't very feeling so great about what I had to offer [*laughs briefly*]. And so that was nice. And then third, I thought, well, if Ellen Lippmann only has two years or whatever it was at that point left at this congregation, I mean, I'd be a fool anyway to turn down an opportunity to work with and learn from her. But I thought it would just really make absolutely no sense at all, since I did, and there's a lot of, you know, I had time. I had capacity. I knew about nonprofit boards and I enjoyed board service. So anyway, that was how – And so then I joined the board, I remember like really I think like 2016, um, so yeah a little over six years ago and I guess I've been officially a member of the board and then um got involved with the fundraising committee, was invited to join the executive committee as like a member at large, not as an officer, but as a member at large, and then was asked to be Vice President, which is an offer, uh, officer role. And I said, sure, I'll do that under the understand, with the understanding that under no circumstances will I become president [*Neta chuckles a bit*]. And everyone said, yeah, yeah, no, that's fine. We just need a Vice President, so, you know, we'll figure the rest out. And then so I did that and I liked it and I really enjoyed being on the Exec and I was learning a ton and it was all very rewarding. And then, um, uh Carolyn Klassen (sp?), who was my predecessor, was the President at the time, just like had all these other commitments and things in her life. She was getting married. She was finishing her dissertation, she was launching a job search. There was just like a ton going on and determined that she really needed to step down, as President. And so, at first I said, oh, well, of course you do like you take whatever you need to do to take care of yourself and we'll manage it. And then we got off the phone and I thought, Oh [*laughs*]...*oh*. Um and I never it was *daunting*, the idea. I mean, it really was an intimidating, but I thought, I can't not do this. And it would just be sort of be disingenuous to have [*aside: 'hello, hi Stewart' (Stewart walks by and says hello)*]⁴ to have this moment, you know, to have this kind of need to step up and not do it. So here I am.

Neta Kafka [00:06:00] Hm. What do you think was behind that? um It almost feels like there was a sense of obligation.

Anne Sherman: Oh, yeah. Yes.

Neta Kafka: What? What do you feel like? Where do you feel like that comes from? And do you feel like that, It seems like that not just manifest itself at Kolot, but in like the work you do with social impact nonprofits, um, where do you feel like that sort of obligation to do good and to serve comes from?

Anne Sherman [00:06:28]: Oh, that's a really great question. I yeah, I always had interest in... working at the time I didn't have this language, but working in the social sector, the not-for-profit world. And my career has always focused on that, although I really haven't, when I was consulting to non-profits, I was, I worked for a consulting firm for a for-profit firm, but always working with and for, with mission driven organizations. And I guess...It has to come from my parents. I think my mom in particular is a very she's been involved with some nonprofits on and off that she's just I

² More about the organizational structure can be [found here](#), and information on responsibilities of Board members can be found [at this link](#).

³ Anne has 20+ years of experience as a professional non-profit consultant and strategic planner.

⁴ At this moment in the interview, Kolot member Stewart, who attended services that morning, walks by the bench Anne and I were sitting on and says hi to us.

just think. She's a person with a great sense of duty and obligation. And my dad was a cardiologist and very dedicated to his work. And I know that um for him, helping people feel better or like taking care of people and helping them either deal with their heart disease or get better or whatever was just incredibly rewarding and a real driving force in his life. He never really said that, I don't. He must have said it. I don't remember him saying it that much, but it was just really evident. He was just he was he was a very good cardiologist, but he was a really also excellent clinician and really enjoyed... spent a lot of time with his patients, drove everyone crazy because he was always running an hour or two behind. But he really took time with people and that's something I think that definitely was a huge influence on me. And we were talking earlier about some of the things I like about this role, and that's definitely part of it.

Neta Kafka [00:08:38] Mmm. Hmmm. Thank you for sharing that.

Anne Sherman: Sure.

Neta Kafka: Um, so I guess I would sh...shift a little bit to a question about more specific to your experience so far as president of Kolot and asking kind of like what occupies most of your time in that role and um what, related to that, what you might see as like the main challenges or issues you're working on of Kolot at this time?

Anne Sherman [00:09:13] Yeah.....

Anne Sherman: I'll start with the second question because it'll probably get me to the first. So Kolot is about to turn 30 years old, which I think.⁵ And it's, it's a really remarkable place. I don't know if you've heard the sort of the, the lore of the story or its origin story is that it started with a bunch of friends sitting around a dining room table talking about a vision for a Jewish spiritual community. And I think actually it wasn't even going to be a synagogue per se. I think Ellen told me that they were thinking about like even a cafe or something, and I don't. You probably know the details actually much better than I do about this, but, it turned into a synagogue. And it and Ellen Lippmann was our founding rabbi. And it started with the real mission of justice and inclusion. Unaffiliated. Um, so I'd say the one where yeah. The denomination that I think we're probably closest to is Reconstructionist,⁶ but I don't even know why we're not Reconstructionist, but we're not, like it's a very independent place. And so we grew and did things in ways, I guess, that that made sense or that, you know, as opportunities allowed and organically. That's my understanding. And then... and the congregation really grew, and started to do the things that nonprofit organizations, businesses you do, you grow and you start to...you understand that, like volunteers can't do it all. That you need to rethink um, just the kind of, staff that you need, the people that you need, and the amount that you need them. And so, um, all of which is to say, Ellen stepped down, just about five years ago. Or coming up on five years. And since I've been on the... which is, since I've been on the board, it's all been about, it's all been in the context of major change, major change. Founder transitions are typically... they're very challenging for any organization. And I think this one Kolot, this synagogue, did a *really* good job, of planning for and in the days certainly leading up to it, Carolyn, who's our president for at term, a little over a term, um played a huge role in that in and like leading this transition committee. And um and then we had a [sound] we were going to have a an interim rabbi but couldn't find someone that was a good fit. And so we had a year where

⁵ According to the timeline, Kolot indeed was founded by Ellen Lippman, Rebbetzin Kathryn Conroy, Judith Kane, Peter Kleinbard, Fred Miller, Pat Miller, and Steve-who-moved-to-South-Dakota in 1993, meaning the congregation is approaching its 30th birthday.

⁶ Reconstructionist Judaism is a movement founded by Mordecai Kaplan in the early 20th century United States. [According to Rebecca Alpert](#), Reconstructionism sees Judaism as an ““evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people’ and seeks to integrate modern ideals,” such as democracy and inclusion of women into Judaism.

the executive director, Sheri Levine, the Cantor, Lisa Segal, the person who was the head of social justice, I think at that point she was, Franny Silverman. And I knew I'd do this. Oh, God, I can't believe it. Oh. Oh. And then our student, Rabbi Miriam Grossman, took of a fourth year thing. We called her a rabbinic intern, and the four of them were our leadership team. And in that year, we did the search for the rabbi. Sorry, I'm going really far afield here, but um, that was a huge change and that was part of the board experience. So first we had the planning for the transition, then we had the transition the year without the interim, the search, and then the hiring of Miriam, who's our rabbi today, and her first three years as our rabbi and her doing this as, as the successor to the founder, a brand-new Rabbi herself, a Rabbi who um had never been a pulpit. It's unusual, I guess, in the Jewish world for someone to come right out of Rabbi school and, excuse me, Seminary and become like have their own congregation. Maybe they're an assistant rabbi. I don't know. But anyway, she is very unusual, as you heard this morning. She's just an amazing person. So there was that. And then on *top* of all that, we had COVID land within a year. Like in her first year.

Neta Kafka: Wow.

Anne Sherman: So there was a lot of change in all of that. And so, I think it's been characterized by change [laughs], which has been great and in my my tenure as a board member and now as President. And it's wonderful and exciting because we're like we've grown by something like 40% since, uh in the past four or five years.

Neta Kafka: Wow

Anne Sherman: And normally, we were expecting the reverse, we expected. And I think because I think this happens a lot. Like the membership might shrink a little bit with the departure of a truly beloved and and a founder, beloved rabbi, leader and a founder. And people, you know, are very attached to their rabbi. And sometimes they're just like, well, let's wait and see. But we've actually *grown* at this point by about 40% in the past five years. Again, wonderful. Again, challenging. There's just challenges that come with it. And so that's been part of it. I also uh I know a decent amount about nonprofit boards. I do not, I did not come into this job, this role, knowing anything at all about synagogues. I wasn't a member of one growing up. My mother actually is not Jewish, and I converted to Judaism before Russell and I got married. But I didn't, I've never like I'd never been a member and I certainly never had a bnai mitzvah or anything like that. So I and that was I've been learning certainly been a big learning curve for me around that, and understanding the ways that the role of the board and like the role of the board President is just different in a synagogue than it is in most other, I think, nonprofits. So, a lot of learning, which has been challenging, but also, you know, very interesting and rewarding.

Neta Kafka: [00:16:30] Mm hmm. Um, I guess my question would be you identified growth as one of the main areas of excitement and challenge and change as a sort of throughline of your time on the board at Kolot. Um, what, what do you think it is about growing fast and furiously as Kolot has that is challenging, like what are the challenges associated with growth and do you feel like um the challenges associated with growth that I know you are familiar with from some other nonprofit work, is that framework applicable to those same challenges at Kolot? I know those are two questions. Maybe I'll just stick with the first one first.

Anne Sherman [00:17:23] Uh, what is challenging? What's exciting and what's challenging?

Neta Kafka [00:17:24] Yeah, like what is what are the challenges of growth?

Anne Sherman [00:17:26] Okay. And some of them, I think, are pretty standard across organizations. Um. Let's see. So. So if you just think about like a human life cycle and you start out and you're born and you grow very rapidly, and then we hit adolescence, which, you know, growing pains. Um. Things look different. They feel different. And, sometimes call on a different kind of response. Um. One thing that we've done that has been great is build and administer like a actually a team of full time staff. Kolot uh didn't have staff for a long time. And Sheri Levine, who's our executive director, is our first time, uh our first full time executive director. So that was a big shift. And so some of it is, is building structures and systems um that I think are probably inherent to being part of any organization. I think...I think when you have, that's one example. I think another example is when you have a founder along who is the long time leader and the only leader of in this case, this congregation and that person leaves. So this is one of the ways in which I really don't know a lot about the synagogue life. But my, Miriam, has been a very generous and helpful teacher. People just become attached to their, their clergy. And the same goes for Lisa, I should say. She's also very much - the Cantor - very, you know, here from the beginning, a beloved leader. And I think there's for longer time members, although for many others as well. Ellen, was this just like for them... I don't want to say she was Kolot, but certainly Kolot, I think was their, naturally, their experience, understanding, association of Kolot, is very much tied to her and to Lisa. And Ellen was leaving. And I think that there's, um, I mean, that just happens in a lot of organizations. I think, you know, this is this isn't just a religious membership organization. This is where people come to have, to live their spiritual and religious lives. And again, I'm not speaking from personal experience, but my understanding of Kolot, was founded, not exclusively, certainly, but by people who largely - not entirely - but as queer people were not there wasn't really a place for them in Judaism, even Reform Judaism.⁷ I was shocked, but I guess I shouldn't have been to learn that when Ellen became a Rabbi, over 30 years ago, she she went to a reform serm--seminary and she wouldn't have been able to like, I think, as an out gay person, have her own pulpit.⁸ But you have to fact check me on that. My, I, I I'm not so great with facts [*Neta laughs*], but I feel like I remember hearing that at some point. And so you can just imag-- try to imagine what that means. So, so people come for many reasons and people come to Kolot...all of us have pain and suffering in our lives. And we, we look --those of us who are in religious congregations, I think we we use them to get solace um, and comfort and support and strength. And we really try to be...we are not at all perfect, but we work to be an inclusive place. And so certainly that goes for gender and sexual identity. We are trying to become, uh, we are trying to really be deliberate and intentional in advancing on a journey toward anti-racism. We try to have an open tent when it comes to Israel-Palestine, which I understand is pretty highly unusual in the Jewish world. But all these things, it's we have such aspirations and... And it's it's hard to live into them as you're growing and change. Like, by-by definition, we have to adapt and grow and change. And that's that's just challenging.

Neta Kafka [00:22:34] Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing that. That's such a just interesting perspective to have and story to have. I'm curious sort of you brought um up in that last little segment that um you were not raised Jewish and you converted, um, right around the time when you were meeting your husband.

⁷ Reform Judaism is a denomination that emphasizes the importance of Jewish tradition while simultaneously acknowledging the need to adapt and change to modern times. It is more liberal and open than denominations such as Conservative and Orthodox (<https://www.reformjudaism.org/>). According to Pew Research Center, Reform is now the dominant Jewish denomination in America, with 33% of Jewish adults identifying as Reform in 2020 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/22/denominational-switching-among-u-s-jews-reform-judaism-has-gained-conservative-judaism-has-lost/>).

⁸ According to the Human Rights Campaign, as early as 1977 the Union for Reform Judaism passed a resolution for the equal protection of 'homosexual persons.' In subsequent decades, the URJ and Central Conference of American Rabbis passed 12+ resolutions related to the inclusion and rights of LGBTQ+ Jews. However, it is unclear what the Reforms rules were surrounding pulpits at the time of Rabbi Ellen's rabbinical education.

Anne Sherman [00:23:03] Uh, we were before, it was a few years into that. We were, we were together about five or six years before we got married. It's about a year, not even, before we got married that I finished my conversion process.

Neta Kafka [00:23:15] Could you tell me a little bit more about what sparked that interest and why you chose Judaism?

Speaker 2 [00:23:24] So my dad was Jewish, grew up very areligious, which I think is very common in upper and middle class, 20th century Jewish life, is, I guess people really wanted to in many ways assimilate into what American life and culture had to offer. It was very much and there was a real, I think, sense of striving to that. And many, all of them, regardless of who you were as a Jew at that time, you came from a place that was not your land and was even if your family had been there for centuries, like in Europe. But. Um. Yeah, always a lot of exclusion and othering and in many ca-, anti-Semitism and in many cases far worse. So. I think that informed by my father's family's decision to not engage really very— well he had a bar mitzvah, but I think that was it. His sibling and his brother had a bar mitzvah, and I think they disdained it also, but they were culturally very Jewish. And when my father met my mother, who was Protestant, um my grandmother, his mother did not take it well at all. She was she was kind of an hysteric anyway. And she really she didn't react well. Things changed as soon as they had me and other grandchildren. But she was very difficult and not very nice to my mother. So I didn't grow up—the organized religion I was exposed to actually growing up was my mother. She was, uh she. You said you were raised, uh UU, uh my mother, she was raised Lutheran, but in her adult life joined the United Church of Christ in Danbury⁹, which is pretty left wing, I think, Protestant denomination. And I *hated* church. I *hated* it. I used to have to go, not consistently, but I did have to go to Sunday School, but I *really hated* it and I just didn't relate to any of it. And but always, I don't think it was a *big* defining part of my life, but I think I definitely, I lacked some sense of identity, that I felt like other people had. And I always related more or identified more with my father's side of the family anyway. And I remember being at my *grandmother's* funeral, and it was just at a funeral home on the Upper West Side. And they, the rabbi that came in and did it, certainly didn't know her. He was affiliated with the funeral home. She was not a member of a congregation or anything. But I just remember being really impressed at him, how intelligent and thoughtful he was and what a nice job he did, considering honestly, he had never met my grandmother or anyone of my family, probably until like maybe even that day, I don't know. And I just remember being really struck by that. And like the people that came, she was an increasingly difficult person in the final years of her life. Not lovable at all, but people really came and I just remember being impressed by that, too. So that got me thinking and I...converted. Also, my husband wanted to be married by a Rabbi and even 23 years ago it was pretty hard to find rabbis um, at least, yeah, that would marry interfaith couples, which is it was not the only reason, but it sort of motivated me to move forward on the journey.

Neta Kafka [00:27:20] Mmhmm. And then, um, you said that was in like 1999...

Anne Sherman [00:27:22] That I converted, Yep.

Neta Kafka [00:27:25] Okay. And Kolot, there was sort of a gap in between that and Kolot...

Anne Sherman [00:27:30] A huge gap. Yeah. [noise] A gap.

Neta Kafka [00:27:33] What did that time of your Jewish life look like before...

⁹ Danbury, Connecticut, where Anne spent her childhood.

Anne Sherman: Yeah...

Neta Kafka: ...Kolot?

Speaker 2 [00:27:41] It really wasn't one. There was going to his grandmother's for Passover or maybe having Hanukkah celebrations with his family, or like the random wedding or something here or there. But that was. That was it.

Neta Kafka [00:27:57] Mhmm. And I know you touched a little bit on this in the beginning, but um, joining, Kolot, sort of through your kids. Could you talk a little bit more about why it was important to you and your family to raise your kids in Judaism and maybe a little bit more of why Kolot within...

Anne Sherman: Yeah.

Neta Kafka: ...Judaism?

Anne Sherman [00:28:19] Well. I know... Russell had grown up. He was had a bar mitzvah. His brother had a bar mitzvah. He was not tied, especially to his congregation growing up. But I think it was just an excu...It was important for him to raise Jewish children. And I... I can't remember really what I thought about it, except that made sense to me. And I remember thinking, like, I know they talk about people who have the zeal of the converted but not going. And I definitely wanted to convert to Judaism. Like, that was my idea to do it. But I remember just thinking, it's kind of hard to do it as an adult. Like I can imagine if you're. Well, it was hard for me as an adult to do it. Not having any...not just grounding...but also, I don't know, I just, I felt like maybe if, if I if this had been part of my life as a child, just some of it would have been like, I wouldn't have to think about it so much. It just. Which you don't tell the rabbis that I said that... You know what I mean? Like, I think uh the a part of what I thought was if this was just more natural to me –and I know there people have all different kinds of experiences, people who are raised Jewish and can't, like leave it behind fast enough, people who are raised in other faiths and like, I've served with on the board with people like this who just embraced 110%. So it's different for everyone. But that was kind of my experience of converting, and it's something I'm still definitely like thinking about. And I talked about it in when I did my pitch, like, I really don't know what's going on most of the time during services, I kind of have an idea, but sometimes, but I certainly don't know what like the prayers are. I just like the way they sound and I just, I like, I kind of like the mystery of that, that every that people are singing or chanting or whatever we call it and it's beautiful to listen to and, and that there are these Jews either standing or sitting doing it like people have been doing this for thousands of years, not quite this way, but it's very powerful to me that like that thing is like still happening here today in a church of all places in Park Slope in Brooklyn, New York, and especially at a time I don't know if, like this 'fun fact' has been mentioned to you, but congregations around the country are shrinking. Jewish congregations around the country are shrinking and we are growing. And that is something to me. And so I don't like take for granted. So I Shammash¹⁰ – I do the volunteer greeter thing about once a month because it is not at all natural for me to go to services and, but I feel like as, as a board member, but particularly as President, I should be there because I should be getting to know the community and having this is one way to experience Kolot. So, it's always like I always

¹⁰ Also spelled Shamash. Lexically, a Shamash is defined as either a) caretaker of the Synagogue, b) a personal assistant or aide to the rabbi, or c) the candle lit first and then used to light others during Hannukah celebrations. In the context of Kolot, to Shammash is to act as a greeter during services, handing out the prayer books and schedule for the day and saying hello to participants as they enter the building.

like I'm impressed by the number of people who show up and I always just like look at the room and like, wow, all these people showed up today to do this thing. And I don't take that for granted. I feel like there was another question though. Is there another question?

Neta Kafka [00:32:15] Um, well, sort of. Um. I think you hit on it really well. Of what, of the why Kolot. Um. And for your kids?

Anne Sherman: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Neta Kafka: So that was the main thing, um, both of those things. So those are great.

Anne Sherman: Um, one also just others will tell you this or your colleagues this, but it should be said that, Kolot, if you identify as Jewish, that's really all Kolot needs to know. And that to me is obviously I remember. Um, do you know what a Mohel is?

Neta Kafka [00:32:48] I don't.

Anne Sherman [00:32:49] A Mohel is, well do you know, Jewish babies, boys have circumcisions when they're eight days old.¹¹

Neta Kafka [00:32:54] Yup.

Anne Sherman [00:32:55] And so we had to have one for Benjamin. And the Mohel who did it for us was really a nice guy, either conservative or maybe modern Orthodox. I can't remember. He was very nice and he was asking us Russell and me about our Jewish backgrounds. And I mentioned that I converted, and he said, Look, I'm fine with it, I don't have a problem with it. But you should just know that depending on the Jewish community, because you converted in a, a Reform congregation, basically, I think he was saying, if like you ever want to be orthodox, it won't be. And which that was not a problem. That's like not an option. But just in contrast with Kolot, that's not the kind of thing Kolot cares about at all. And in fact, I think is sort of antithetical to our values of welcoming and inclusion. And, um, a year or two before she stepped down, Rabbi Lippmann did the.. it must've been the Kol Nidre, the night before Yom Kippur, she did the drash, the the sermon with her wife, Kathryn. And it was amazing. It was like this back-and-forth dialog. And I remember Kathryn saying the the only rule about Kolot, the only the only rule at Kolot is that no one gets to oppress anyone else. And that just always stuck with me. That's something I think about. So that's not why I joined Kolot, but it is, I think, a very good reason to, to join a place and stick with it.

Neta Kafka: Mm hmm. That yeah, it's such a beautiful idea and definitely resonates with me. Um, I'm curious, you, so you brought up because we're on the subject kind of Kol Nidre.¹²

Anne Sherman: Yeah.

Neta Kafka: I watched your appeal this year and learned a lot about you in that appeal. But I'm curious, um, you know, you mentioned in that that you were not pretty yet, particularly religious or spiritual. But one, some—something you mentioned is that you had this sort of wow factor at the end, all these people coming together around a tradition as old as the hills and continuously challenging it and reshaping it for personal connection and meaning. And I'm wondering for you

¹¹ Just as Anne describes, a Mohel (or Mohelet) is an individual who is trained to perform circumcisions.

¹² Kol Nidre is the prayer/services on the eve of Yom Kippur.

personally like what your personal and collective connection, and meaning is [that was loud, -laughs-]

Anne Sherman [00:35:43] And you mean like faith or belief?

Neta Kafka [00:35:45] Yeah. Like what, what are some wow worthy things to you? And, um.

Speaker 2 [00:35:56] Well, I really. I haven't. And I. I would tell you if I had an answer. I mean, the experience, like I was saying, of just being there, listening to people chant liturgy that I don't understand and I, in a way, I prefer not to understand it. Um, and knowing that they come from different backgrounds and, you know, in indirectly or directly in ways big or small, like to get to this point in their lives, they had to fight something or work hard to get there again, whether it was themselves or people on their behalf or by virtue of being Jews or other ways in which maybe they've been harmed or discriminated against. So that to me is like, wow worthy. As President, I do feel a huge sense, as a board member, and particularly now as President, I do feel a huge sense of responsibility. I don't know what it means, but I know that it's a big deal. To me it's a big deal that we are we have fiduciary responsibility for the 660 or 605, however many we are now, adult members and in many cases their children. That to me is a pretty profound responsibility. And as President, I just...that's something I wrestle with, is because I think I've had to feel a little less responsibility. So that's something I've been working on. But there is there is something very big about that for me and... I, I'm not sure. I wouldn't even know what to say about my belief in God. Honestly, but...but we also are...surrounded by miracles. So even as scary, scary and dark as things can get, amazing things still happen. I try to keep that on the front burner also.

Neta Kafka [00:38:39] I love that idea. Um, thanks for sharing that.

Anne Sherman: Course, of course.

Neta Kafka: That's nice. Shifting gears a little bit, back to almost the kind of like logistical side of things being president.

Anne Sherman: Uh huh.

Neta Kafka: I read in your –your email to the congregation that one of the most meaningful parts of your, um, experience as a board member and as President has been as working on the anti-racism issues and part of the white um anti-racist affinity group. The WAAG, I think you guys call it.

Anne Sherman: Yeah.

Neta Kafka: I was wondering if you could just if you wanted to talk about that a little bit more and what you see as the main uh challenges of that work and what that work involves for you.

Anne Sherman [00:39:30] Yeah.

Anne Sherman [00:40:00] One thing I can say is that. Just being involved with Kolot has given me a way to learn about and think about and challenge myself as a white person who lives in a racist world and has internalized a lot of racism. So I really think that's only become increasingly– more important to me over the years. And like now that I have kids, and I have been lucky to have friends in Kolot who really–white friends—who have really mentored me and helped me. Yeah. Just taught me a lot. And who I can turn to, to ask questions. WAAG. Uh, Barbara Grossman I don't know if

you've been talking to— Barbara GROSS (I keep doing that), uh Barbara GROSS who actually sits on the board and is a longtime board member, she with this woman, Bobby Samet, they started WAAG. We had three WAAG cohorts and I think it was a really good and important thing to...have that opportunity for white people to learn about structural racism and talk about it and what it's look like in our lives and what it looks like at Kolot. So that's that's one thing. Um, that's just been really important to me personally. Kolot's not the only place where I have tried to think about or address racism in my life, in myself, but it's been an important one. I'd say that.... and I know you'll be talking to other people about this. Not you, but you and your cohort, your colleagues will be talking to other people about this. This is really an area, I think, where we struggled. I and how. How to...I don't think we'll ever. I don't think any place will ever be...unracist. But we are we are trying to be deliberate about being anti-racist and advancing on that journey. And. We have, stumbled and faltered, and people of color have experienced have had the experience of being...Harmed... Feeling excluded, feeling like, being treated as if they are not the same as- or, I don't want to put words in people's mouths, but there's there has been pain for people of color. And I think we are... we have, um, we now have an anti-racism committee on the board and we've made it a committee *of* the board, which means we will *always* be on the, one of our committees and it's new. Barbara Gross is the chair and, um, so that's one thing that we're doing and we put, for us a decent amount of money in the budget this year to hire a consultant to help us do an assessment and help us come up with a plan to be able to advance on the journey toward being anti-racist. It's, it's, it's um, it will always be something I think, it's always something we will have to deal with...and...work on and struggle with in this country. And as an Ashkenazi Jewish congregation, meaning more or less people from Europe and Eastern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, we will always be vast majority white. So, I think that just poses special and important questions for us to be thinking about when we talk about things like inclusion, when we talk about things like understanding how, how to honor and recognize the work that people of color have done in this community, *for* this community. Yeah, it's um, I'm not being very articulate. I guess I don't really have any good answers, um, but it's something I'm very committed to working on. And I know certainly our clergy and our and the staff and the Board. I think also, part of the reality of being white and living in a racist country is, is also that we're – I think of it as a spectrum and we're all at different points on the spectrum in terms of our knowledge, our experience, our lived experience of racism and anti-racism. So that's part of the work I see as we're talking about this restructuring, is also understanding how being intentional about integrating anti-racist practices into our work, like on committees, board meetings, et cetera.

Speaker 1 [00:46:29] Thank you. To segway into the restructuring a little bit more. Is the like almost institutionalization of that anti-racist committee on the board— that is part of the restructuring. Um, what have been some other elements of the restructuring of the board? And is that process ongoing or is it...

Anne Sherman: Very much.

Neta Kafka [00:46:59] Okay.

Anne Sherman: [00:47:01] So we had, came to a collective agreement, I think, with the senior staff, clergy and board. This goes back to the, the challenges of change. And. What is, we are a very hands on board. And in the beginning, because the board actually did the work of running the congregation. It's been a while since that's been true. Totally true. But also, as I said to you, just for the first time like five years ago, we hired our first full-time executive director and a lot of other... We have a full-time admin assistant person, which is only been true three, four years, something like that, we have a part time communicat... like we have a professional staff of about six or seven

people. That's all new. It's new for the congregation. It's new for the board. They do a lot of work and I...a ton, a ton of work. And it's because we're serving a larger community, right? And there's just different demands and...But also there's, so there's like the change you have on paper and there is the change in behavior or action. But then there's also and some of that is easier then like cultural change. And what does it mean for us to shift as a board into a, into more of a culture where we and the staff have a strong mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities. So that's part of what the restructuring is about. It's like even some basic things, like making sure we do like have consistent position descriptions and committee descriptions and an org chart that makes sense and, you would think that this would be a very straightforward thing to do, but it turns out it's not, at least in this community [laughs]. And so that's a big part of the restructuring is. Not just the putting things down on paper, but also the thought that goes into, well, why-why are we saying this person reports to that person or what does it mean if like, I as, I don't know, as a board member, you. I'm just making this up that maybe in the past I've got to make a decision about something, or I would be consulted about something. But now what we're seeing, it's like actually for this thing to happen, for a staff person to be able to do this in an amount of time, that makes sense um, we will inform you. But it's really like the responsibility and the—the input is, is going to be in the hands of the staff now. And that's really it that that's not the only kind of decision, but that's just an example of how it's change, change is hard. Change can be hard.

Neta Kafka: [00:50:20] Mhmm. wow. Um, well, I feel like we've touched on a lot of stuff.

Anne Sherman: Yeah.

Neta Kafka: I am wondering if there's anything else that you want to touch on that. I brought up a lot of things, but that you think is an important part of your story of Kolot's story. Both of those things, um, hat you want to talk about at all?

Anne Sherman: Um, well.

Anne Sherman: [00:51:01] I know that it's something that can happen and I think has to happen is that as you have growth. As a community grows like you, you can't have the same kind of connection to one another. Like we're gaining a lot of things through our growth and expansion, but some things are also lost. And so something that is important, like and. It's just a question on my mind. I haven't, I don't really have a clue about how to make it happen. Is how do you um, how do you retain a strong sense of community, um, even if, even if that is something different, like connection and belonging to which you feel invested. And again, I know, I-I know that we're not unique in this way, but feeling invested in this community, and, I hate to possibly end on this note, but understanding that like, I want people to really feel a sense of belonging and community and however they choose to engage in Kolot, whether it's coming to services or, the Children's Learning Program or adult education or the High Holy Days service, or whatever. There's so many different ways to engage in Kolot. And as, I really don't want this to be like my culminating statement [laughs], but I do want to I do want to say [laughs] I do I, I just in the interest of transparency, like something that is on my mind is and I'm not alone here is how we're going to *pay* for this because, and we're very lucky that we have a healthy reserve, but you have a reserve, so you have a rainy day fund, you don't have a reserve to... And we're doing okay, financially we're very healthy. But I'd say we are stretched, our staff are stretched, and part of the evolving culture is more of a culture of – I used to call it a culture of philanthropy, and that didn't always go over so well. But the idea being that we have, that membership dues, it's like NPR¹³, you know, or like colleges, but we're definitely not like a college. But, you know, like most people pay some membership dues and we have a, sort

¹³ National Public Radio.

of a choose your own adventure, like you get to decide based on your income what amount is right for you. And that's an honor sys – an honor system for me. And understanding, though, that in any congregation, maybe most of the revenue comes from there. But we have to, we have to have charitable giving as well. So, I think. That's, just to be honest, that's another type of investment, that that there are things that we are very happy and honored to offer as part of our mission and doing what we can to do our mission well...and that it all requires resources in the world, in this world that we live in. So that's something else I was just thinking about is and that's a huge that's a culture shift ongoing for a while now. But it's um, that's also something that I'm working on.

Neta Kafka [00:54:48] Yeah. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. Um, well, I can ask another question, given that, um, you know, you didn't necessarily want to end on that note.

Anne Sherman: [laughs]

Neta Kafka: And I also wanted to ask this question, but...

Anne Sherman: Yeah

Neta Kafka: ...forgot about it until now of why you wanted to join this project. Um...

Anne Sherman: Oh...

Neta Kafka: ...and why you wanted to be a part of the Kolot tradition in that way. What motivated you to, you know, give me your precious time today.

Anne Sherman [00:55:25] Well, I don't know that I would have raised my hand had I not been asked, so I was asked. Just the record should show that I was asked. And I was extremely flattered and felt this sense of responsibility. Like as the president, I guess at this moment in time this is like, our time capsule or something, I guess I should be part of it. I was also a history major in college, and I loved history. I wasn't a particularly great student, but I did love things about being a history major. And I love – I love oral history. I really admire Studs Terkel¹⁴, and I love his work. And, I, I just love stories. I listen to The Moth¹⁵ fanatically. And I love Story Corps¹⁶ and I just, I love stories. And I guess I haven't thought about it until now, but in the same way, like being in the room when all these other people are participating or singing during praying during a service. Um, uh, to me, it's like another way of – it's another way of contributing to Kolot and being part of Kolot. Like this thing that you all are doing for us will...it will be part of us, and it will strengthen us and it would not – documenting the history is very important and that's huge. But also that we've gone through this process...I'm not exactly sure what it is I'm trying to say, but it's it's an honor to be able to have a small part in it.

Neta Kafka [00:57:17] Hm, well, I've really enjoyed it.

Anne Sherman: Ah, thank you.

¹⁴ Studs Terkel was a famous public figure and oral historian who hosted his own conversation-based daily radio show on Chicago station WFMT from 1952-1997. He also won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction writing in 1985.

¹⁵ [The Moth](#) is a non-profit organization with the mission to “promote the art and craft of storytelling and to honor and celebrate the diversity and commonality of the human experience.”

¹⁶ [StoryCorps](#) is also a non-profit organization with the mission to “preserve and share humanity’s stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world.”

Neta Kafka: If there's, um, nothing else that you feel like touching on today. I can stop the recording and we can continue chatting, off, uh, off record.

Anne Sherman [00:57:32] Yeah, that's fine. Sure, yeah. Thank you.

Neta Kafka [00:57:33] All right. Yeah, no problem. Thank you. So I'm going to stop the recording here...and then on my phone.